The Real Story Behind the Tobacco Wars

President Clinton would have you think we need an activist federal government to reduce tobacco consumption by minors. With the President's blessing, Food and Drug Administration Commissioner David Kessler recently announced proposed regulations ostensibly aimed at curbing cigarette smoking by teenagers. The political spin the Administration has been using to defend its proposals is that the tobacco companies are successfully encouraging minors to smoke and that only strong federal intervention can reverse the trend.

Nothing could be farther from the truth.

In fact, the tobacco companies have been working actively to prevent underage smoking. For example, Philip Morris, the largest cigarette manufacturer in the country, recently launched an initiative called "Action Against Access," which guarantees funding for programs aimed at making it harder for minors to obtain cigarettes. This program is being monitored by former United States Senator Warren Rudman. It includes steps the company is taking on its own and actions it intends to take in partnership with retailers and government officials.

States already have incentives to pass and enforce minimum age laws under a 1992 law passed by Congress, which conditions certain block grants on state enforcement of minimum age laws for tobacco. But, the

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Clinton Administration has failed to issue regulations required by this Act. According to an April report by the Inspector General of the Department of Health and Human Services, the primary obstacle preventing states from enforcing their youth access laws in compliance with the 1992 law is the Administration's failure to issue these regulations.

The indications are growing that HHS is delaying the regulations required by law, because it fears the regulations would undermine the President's proposal to give the FDA jurisdiction to regulate tobacco at the federal level. It looks like the White House has determined that actually limiting children's access to cigarettes by supporting state initiatives must take a back seat to the appearance of limiting children's access to cigarettes by proposing sweeping new federal regulations.

Why isn't the President, who has declared that he wants to fight underage smoking, supporting state efforts to reduce tobacco consumption?

The answer, as usual, is politics. President Clinton needs an enemy to show that he is tough enough to stand for something. The fact is that there would not be much political gain in working cooperatively with the tobacco companies to reduce underage smoking. And, there is no political mileage in supporting a 1992 law

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that was enacted under President Bush.

All of this would be more petty than deplorable if it did not undermine genuine efforts to keep cigarettes away from children.

The Clinton Administration's sudden interest in tobacco represents "government-by-sound-bite" at its worst. As long as our representatives continue to care more about their press reviews than their duty to do what is right for the country, Washington will continue to crank out empty and counterproductive policies.

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